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Lessons of the Alger Hiss Case

By Richard Nixon

What are the lessons of the Hiss case?

The world is, of course, very different today. This fall, I took an around-the-world trip that took me to many countries I had visited 32 years ago when I was Vice President. On the first trip, many non-Communist educators, labor leaders and journalists honestly felt that the Communist model of the Soviet Union or China might be the best and fastest way to economic progress for newly independent countries in the third world.

That is not the case today. Why? It was 65 years ago that a starry-eyed American newspaper reporter, Lincoln Steffens, returned from the Soviet Union and wrote, "I have been over into the future and it works." Today, the world has seen that future and it doesn't work. It doesn't work in Eastern Europe. It doesn't work in the third world: Cuba, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique are economic disaster areas. Most significant, it doesn't work in the Soviet Union. The only economic success stories are in non-Communist countries.

The Communists have lost the ideological battle — and we see it today even in espionage. The Americans recently charged with spying for the Soviet Union have almost without exception done so for money and not because they believed in the Communist system. Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers and the other members of the espionage group they belonged to in the 1930's did not do what they did for money. They were true believers who had lost faith in the American system and felt that Communism was the wave of the future.

The Hiss case did, neverthless, hold a number of lessons — for the country and for me personally.

One of the most important concerns the breadth and depth of Soviet espionage activities in the United States in the 1930's. Some of Hiss's supporters scoffed at the documents and microfilms that Chambers turned over to the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the courts in 1948 and 1949. Such people contended that the material was unimportant and was not damaging to American security. What they failed to recognize was that anyone who had access to these copies of State Department cables would have been able to break the State Department's code. That meant that the Russians were probably able to read all messages using that code in the period before World War II when the Soviet Union was allied with Nazi Germany.

Beyond this, the skeptics overlook the fact that what Chambers turned over was merely his last haul: He testified that at least 70 other times he had collected a similar amount of papers from Hiss and had delivered them to a Soviet contact. They also fail to recognize that Hiss was only one of Chambers's contacts and that Chambers was only one of several couriers who collected documents and turned them over to Soviet agents.

A second major lesson of the case concerns the mistake, often made in the media and in intellectual circles generally, of confusing style and substance. Most of the reporters covering the Hiss case were obsessed with style. Although he was a senior editor of Time magazine, Chambers was poorly dressed, pudgy, undistinguished in appearance and in background. Hiss, in contrast, was a striking representative of the fashionable Eastern establishment — a graduate of Harvard Law School, clerk to a Supreme Court Justice, an aide to Franklin D. Roosevelt at the Yalta conference and one of the major organizers of the United Nations conference in San Francisco. He had impeccable social and intellectual qualifications, and the list of people who he said would vouch for his character ranged from Adlai E. Stevenson to John Foster Dulles. He, in effect, pleaded innocence by association.

All of this had an enormous impact on the media. They were so dazzled by Hiss's background and his brilliant conduct on the witness stand that they failed to see that beneath the unimpressive exterior, Chambers was a stronger, more intelligent man.

In another lesson, a more personal one, the Hiss case — and my association with Chambers, in particular — had a profound effect in shaping my attitude toward the war in Vietnam. It began with Chambers's comment about the war in Korea: "What people do not understand is that for the Communists, the war in Korea is not a war about Korea, it is a war about Japan." I tried to analyze the war in Vietnam in the same way.

From my vantage point, the war in Vietnam was not just about Vietnam but about Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Angola, Ethiopia and Nicaragua. It is fashionable, today, to deride the domino theory, but any sophisticated observer of foreign policy recognizes that on the world scene, when one domino falls, others do not fall immediately or even adjacently. What happens is more like a move in chess than a move in checkers: In chess, a move on one part of the board can affect any other part of the board.

We are recovering from the Vietnam syndrome, but calls for "no more Vietnams" are raised even today by those who oppose a strong United States role in Central America or other areas of the world where the Communists are engaged in direct or indirect aggression. The American defeat in Vietnam did not just affect Vietnam. It encouraged our enemies and discouraged our friends. But most damaging of all, it weakened the spirit and will of Americans to play a responsible role in the world.

The Hiss case also affected my political career. The Presidential election of 1960 was one of the closest in United States history: A shift of 12,000 votes in Illinois and one other smaller state would have changed the result. A friend of mine, post-morteming the election a few days later, blames the journalistic antipathy directed against me during the campaign: "If it had not been for the Hiss case, I think you might have been elected." I replied that without the Hiss case, I would probably not have been nominated.

I trace my candidacy back to the 1952 campaign, when domestic Communism was a major issue. Eisenhower recognized this; he did not want to address the issue himself and did not want to leave it to Joe McCarthy, whom he bitterly disliked. When Eisenhower chose me as his running mate, he told me, "One of the reasons I picked you was that you got Hiss and got him fairly." He urged me in the campaign to talk about the case because a lot of people thought McCarthy had gotten Hiss.

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The final lesson, for me, grew out of the greatest mistake I made during my investigation of the case — in my questioning of Mrs. Hiss before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. By the time she came to the stand, I was tired and felt that the case had already been broken; as a result, I did not follow up as I should have. She played her role with consummate skill: She was very feminine, delicate and somewhat detached from the whole unpleasant subject — and it was hard for me to believe that she could possibly have been aware of, let alone a part, of a Communist conspiracy.

I should have remembered what Chambers had told me about her — that she was the "red hot" of the two. He pointed out that in the case of Communist couples — and, in fact, of extremists both left and right — the wife is often more extremist than the husband. It has been my observation since that in the political arena men often tend to be pragmatic: They are willing to compromise to achieve their objectives. Women seldom will do so. They tend to be total idealists, true believers, whether the cause is on the left or the right.

The most moving moment of the Hiss hearing came near the end of Chambers's testimony. I asked him: "Can you search your memory now to see what motive you can have for accusing Mr. Hiss of being a Communist? . . . Is there any grudge you have against Mr. Hiss over anything he has done to you?"

He replied: "The story has spread that in testifying against Mr. Hiss, I am working out some old grudge or motives of revenge or hatred. I do not hate Mr. Hiss. We were close friends, but we are caught in a tragedy of history. Mr. Hiss represents the concealed enemy against which we are all fighting and I am fighting. I have testified against him with remorse and pity, but in a moment of history in which this nation now stands, so help me God, I cannot do otherwise."

Chambers is dead. Alger Hiss still lives. But history will record that Chambers was on the right side. □

Richard Nixon was a member of the House Committee on Un-American Activities when Whittaker Chambers came before it in August 1948. This article is adapted from a speech delivered this fall to the Pumpkin Papers Irregulars, a club of students of the Alger Hiss case.